

# Is There An Absolute Truth?



## No Truth Means Everything is True, Doesn't It?

For some of us, it might seem ridiculous to say that truth does not exist, because we have simply assumed the reality and existence of 'truth' since we were very small. But others out there have struggled with the idea that there can be singular, exclusive truth in all areas of life, and if you ask your friends to talk about issues of faith, you will quickly discover that few of them are able to agree on a singular, absolute truth. In fact, many of us have come to the conclusion that there is no one truth about anything. And when we say that nothing is absolutely 'right' or 'true', we are actually saying that EVERYTHING is 'right' and 'true'! If no one particular idea or reality is true to the exclusion of others that are NOT true, then we have to admit that every idea, notion or reality is equally valid and 'true'. Something in our intuition tells us that this simply cannot be the case.

Now we may disagree on the nature of truth at the spiritual level, but it's hard to deny absolute truths at the physical level. As I step out into the street, it's either true or untrue that there are cars racing back and forth in front of me. I make a decision to step out based on the truth that I observe and recognize. If the street is busy with cars speeding back and forth, it is not both true and untrue that I can safely step into traffic. If I do step out, I will not be both dead and 'un-dead' as a result of the truth of the situation. The street is either filled with cars or it is not. It is either safe to cross or it is not. BOTH realities cannot exist at the same time. One truth must exist at the exclusion of the other.

Let's put it another way. As I leave the restaurant tonight and enter the restaurant parking lot, I will need to find my way back to my car. While there may be other similar vehicles in the parking lot, only one of them is mine; only one of them belongs to me. My key will only fit in one door. If I am caught trying to break into a similar car, I will not be able to tell the police that this other vehicle is both mine and not mine. There is a singular exclusive truth about the car involved here. It is either mine or it is not!



## Does This Exclusivity Apply to the Things of God?

But while exclusive truth seems rational and acceptable in the material world, some people have a much harder time accepting the possibility of objective, exclusive truth when it comes to spiritual matters. For these folks, there exist any number of diverse and divergent truths about God and even more possible paths to this God, all of which are said to be true at the same time! But it's important for us to take a deep look at this claim of diversity and religious pluralism. We need to remember that the world's greatest (and even not so great) religions don't make the same claims about God and the nature spiritual reality. And it's not just a matter of each religion adding something to the larger picture. Each of the world's religious systems makes claims about the nature of God (and life after death) that are diametrically OPPOSED! The world's religions simply don't agree with each other! Buddhism claims that there is no personal God, while Christianity argues that there is a personal God. Judaism claims that Jesus was simply a man, while Christianity claims that he was God Himself! Islam encourages its followers to eliminate and destroy all infidels, while biblical Christianity encourages its followers to love their enemies.

These notions are very different and very opposed and they are only a few examples of the literally thousands of points at which world religions disagree. It is fair to say that ALL of these world religions may be wrong about what they believe (each system must make its own case), but it is simply crazy to say that all of the world's religions are correct at the same time; their truth claims are opposed to one another! In spite of this obvious conflict in spiritual truths (or perhaps because of this conflict), the world around us is making a couple of claims about the nature of truth.

### **Truth Does Not Exist**

*First, the world tries to tell us that objective, absolute truth simply does not exist. This is an 'ontological' issue. 'Ontology' relates to the nature or essence of 'being'. The claim here is that ALL truth is 'perspectival' in nature. In other words, all truth depends on your perspective! What may be true for one person may not be true for another; it really simply depends on your point of view.*

### **Truth Cannot Be Known**

*Secondly, the world around us is also making the claim that even if objective, absolute truth does exist, we could never know with certainty what that truth is. This is an 'epistemological' issue. Epistemology relates to the nature of 'knowing' or being able to know something. The claim here is that we simply cannot trust our human mental faculties to tell us what we need to know to come to a conclusion about any truth we are examining.*

For many great philosophical thinkers in history, understanding truth is elusive enterprise based on both its nature and our ability to comprehend it in the first place. But let's take a close look at both of these concerns about truth. To say that truth does not exist is to simply make yet another truth claim and this nullifies any claim against the existence of truth, does it not? And to claim that all truth is 'perspectival' in nature is to once again make a claim that you want others to believe is NOT simply coming from your own perspective. When someone says that all truth depends on your point of view, they want us to believe that this statement is true and not simply their point of view! See the problem? And to say that we simply cannot know the truth, even if it exists objectively, is to once again make a self-refuting claim. How can we know that we cannot know? If certainty is impossible, then how can we be certain that certainty is impossible? Are you starting to understand the silliness of all of this?

Truth is rather brutish in the way that it imposes itself on our lives. It's like a safe dropping from a ten storey building; we either step aside or get crushed. While we may not know all that can be known about something, and while we may all have a distinct perspective about an issue, to deny the existence of truth or the sufficiency of our own knowledge of truth is to begin a series of silly mental experiments. At the end of the day, if we look up and see the safe falling, we are probably going to find ourselves stepping out of the way.

Now not everyone takes this rather common sense approach to truth. Great philosophers through the ages have at times also been great skeptics:

### **Andre Gide**

*"Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it."*

### **Molly Ivins**

*"I believe that ignorance is the root of all evil. And that no one knows the truth"*

### Albert Einstein

*"Truth is what stands the test of experience"*

### Buddha

*"Believe nothing just because a so-called wise person said it. Believe nothing just because a belief is generally held. Believe nothing just because it is said in ancient books, believe nothing just because it is said to be of divine origin. Believe nothing just because someone else believes it. Believe only what you yourself test and judge to be true."*



### **How Did We Get Here?**

So how did we get to this place in our world where so many great thinkers distrust anything that is claimed as truth? How did we get to the point where we trust nothing and, at the same time, embrace everything? Let me tell you about my grandmother. She never had any doubt that there was a singular truth. She grew up in Naples, Italy and spent her early life in a world of common dreams, common values, common faith, common enemies, common holidays, and common lives. In a place like this, everyone agrees on what is true and what is a lie, at least when it comes to the major worldview issues. But my grandmother eventually migrated to the world's greatest experiment in multiculturalism: the United States. There is no other country in the history of mankind that has tried to blend so many different people with so many different backgrounds. Here, my grandmother had to confront the realization that there is more than one way to consider the world. She found herself in a place where few people agreed about ANYTHING. But she learned quickly that disagreeing about truth is not the same as believing that there simply is no truth to argue about; disagreeing about the truth does not mean that truth cannot be known.



### **So, How Do We Know If Something Is True?**

Even if we accept that the Correspondence Theory is the best and most philosophically sound theory related to the assessment of truth, how can we, as individuals, trust that the knowledge we hold is actually true? What is 'knowledge' in the first place and how is 'knowledge' related to 'belief'? Well, philosophers have been thinking about this for some time and the traditional analysis of knowledge is usually described in the following way:

*Knowledge = Properly Justified True Belief*

Now, what exactly does this mean? It's important for you and I to understand this simple little equation because our knowledge of ALL things (including our knowledge of spiritual matters) comes down to whether or not we hold properly justified true beliefs. So, let's examine the definition more precisely, starting backwards from the definition of 'Belief' to the definition of 'Knowledge':

#### **'Belief'**

*Let's face it; you can't 'know' something unless you 'believe' it. I can't 'know' that there is a God unless I believe that God exists. But my belief is simply not enough; it is insufficient. You and I can both believe things that are simply untrue. It is possible for us to have false beliefs. And people who believe something that is false often think*

*that they KNOW it. But there is a difference between 'believing' and 'knowing' in this context. You may 'believe' something that is false, but you can't genuinely 'know' something that is false. Now think about this for a minute. We may 'know' OF something that is false, but what we 'know' is that it IS false! To actually 'know' something is to 'know' that it is TRUE. And you and I can't actually 'know' something to be true unless it actually IS true. In other words, we can't 'know' something unless it is NOT false.*

### ***'True'***

*Most of us like to think that we hold the truth, yet when someone presses us to define what truth is, we might have a hard time trying to define it. How do we determine when something is true? Over the centuries a number of theories have emerged related to assessing, apprehending and understanding truth:*

#### ***The Pragmatic Theory of Truth***

*One notion of truth is called the pragmatic theory of truth. It argues that the truth is simply what 'works'. How many times have you heard someone say, "Your Christianity may work great for you, but it doesn't work for me"? This approach to truth is very practical, if nothing else! If a claim doesn't work, it's simply not true. But what about realities like 'death'? Death is not practical (it doesn't 'work' for me), yet it is definitely true! And what about things that are definitely not true, but are practical and useful like say, a 'successful lie'? While a little white lie might 'work' for me and help me out of a jam, it's doesn't make the lie TRUE, does it? While the Pragmatic Theory may be practical and useful at times, it will not lead us to truth.*

#### ***The Empiricist Theory of Truth***

*The empiricist theory of truth says that the truth is whatever can be sensed using the five senses. Experience is the main factor in understanding and apprehending truth. How many times have you heard someone say, "I know it is true because I experienced it myself!"? While this may seem convincing at first, this theory of truth also falls short of the mark. Think about it: some of us will taste an orange and say that it is sweet, while others will taste the same orange and say it is bitter. Who is telling the truth? Sensory experience is too personal to be trustworthy!*

#### ***The Emotivist Theory of Truth***

*The emotivist theory of truth says that the truth is based on what we feel! How many times have you leaned on feelings to figure out if something was true? At the same time, however, how many times have you struggled to convince yourself that what you are feeling isn't really true, just the way you feel on that particular day? We all know people who hold irrational fears, and these feelings are not the best indicator of what is true! And what if I show you a handful of paperclips and make the claim, "This is a handful of paperclips"? How are your feelings going to assist you in determining if my claim is true? You aren't really going to feel one way or the other about the clips, but it will still be true that I am holding paperclips! And people have relied on their feelings to follow Jim Jones, to sleep with a sex partner who later dumped them, to make an impulsive purchase. In each and every case, feelings fail to provide an objective*

*measurement for truth! Like the first two theories, this theory is not a great way to assess truth claims!*

### **The Correspondence Theory of Truth**

*This classic definition of truth is the theory that you and I use on a daily basis, whether we even know it or not. Let me describe it in Aristotelian language: If you say "Something is," and it is, or "It is not," and it is not, then you speak truth. If you say "It is," and it is not, or "It is not," and it is, then you don't speak truth. This is called correspondence, in other words, a thing is true if and only if it actually corresponds to what is really there. As an example, if I claim that there is a chair in the next room, that claim is true if and only if I enter the room and find that there is a chair in the room! The claim corresponds to the reality of the situation.*

*Just as belief alone is insufficient in determining if what I believe is true, belief and truth are insufficient in determining whether or not I truly 'know' something. In other words, I can believe something and my belief can be true, but I may still not actually 'know' the thing believed. Are you scratching your head? Let me explain. Let's say that I think up the idea right now that Paris Hilton is playing golf. I work hard to convince myself that this is in fact the case, and as a result I now 'believe' it. Now imagine that by sheer coincidence, Paris Hilton is actually playing golf at this very minute. I have a belief, don't I? And my belief just happens to be true, isn't it? But there's one problem; I have no EVIDENCE that my belief is true. I have no confirmation of my belief either physically or even psychically, for that matter! I just got lucky; it was a complete coincidence.*

*From a classic philosophical perspective, I do not possess real 'knowledge'. Philosophers require more than luck or coincidence here. According to philosophers, real knowledge requires that there be an evidential connection between my 'affirming' something to be true, and the 'reality' of whether it actually IS true. Does that make sense? Knowledge is not just true belief; it is 'properly justified' true belief. If I had actually been watching Paris Hilton play golf live on television, my beliefs about her would have been properly justified. Do you get it?*

### **'Properly Justified'**

*OK, so what kind of justification is sufficient to establish a truth as 'properly justified'? What exactly do we need? We all want to be reasonable and rational people who hold reasonable and rational beliefs. And we all recognize that reason can lead us and connect us to truth. So, the real question is, "What is required for us to have 'reasonable justification'?" Well, our daily life and our experience with the criminal court system in our country can help us understand the answer here. It is something that I call, "evidential sufficiency":*

### **Evidential Sufficiency**

*Begin by understanding that every time you accept a new belief, you are going to have to jettison any old beliefs that contradict the new position. So here is the standard of 'evidential sufficiency' in a nutshell:*

*Only accept a new belief if the evidence to support its truth far outweighs the evidence that exists to support the prior belief.*



*It's really as simple as that. This is the standard that exists in the courtroom. We begin with the presumption that the accused is INNOCENT. This is the first belief that we are to hold until there is sufficient evidence to jettison that belief and find the accused GUILTY of the crime.*

*Sufficiency of evidence doesn't really have much to do with the QUANTITY of the evidence offered, but instead is more concerned with the QUALITY of the evidence. So, for example, I might hold the properly justified true belief ('PJTB') that Paris Hilton golfed today based on a single piece of evidence: I actually golfed with her! This one piece of evidence (my eyewitness experience) would be sufficient for me to hold to this PJTB. On the other hand, I could still hold this PJTB even if I didn't see it with my own eyes. If she was gone for three hours, came back carrying a set of golf clubs, got a phone call from the club saying that she left her sunglasses on hole number four, and presented me with her score card, I would have sufficient circumstantial evidence to hold the PJTB that she was golfing today. Sometimes one piece of direct physical evidence is enough (like my eyewitness observation) and sometimes a cumulative circumstantial case is required.*

So, now that we have defined the elements of our equation, let's revisit it one last time. Knowledge is properly justified true belief. In other words, knowledge is belief that corresponds to reality in a way that is evidentially sufficient. Based on our discussion so far, it should be clear that (1) truth exists, and (2) truth can be sufficiently known.



### **The Biblical Truth About Truth**

Remember that unless truth exists and can be known, no statement about truth has any value. We've made a good philosophical case for truth, and it just so happens that Jesus himself affirmed that truth exists and that truth could be found. Let's take a look at a few examples from the scripture:



#### **John 17:15-19**

*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*

God wants you to realize that people are inclined to question the truth, and even the truth about truth! God is not surprised that we do this, but he rejoices when we finally understand that there is an absolute truth about all things, including spiritual matters:



#### **2 Timothy 4:2-5**

*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*



### 3 John 1-4

*Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*



### How Do We Face A World That Denies Truth?

I can remember when I was in college and watched a teacher challenge a lone Christian in our class. The discussion on philosophy and faith systems turned to the issue of Christianity and absolute truth and the teacher began to question the Christian about his beliefs. He accused the young man of being an arrogant, judgmental bigot. How could this young man claim that HIS truth was the only truth? The teacher claimed that truth was personal and changes according to the holder.

But of course to make this very claim is a complete contradiction. When you say there is no singular absolute truth, you are making a claim of absolute truth. You are, in essence, saying "I claim absolutely that there is no absolute truth!" of course this teacher is living in a world of absolute truths, whether he wants to admit it or not! He required us to be there, sitting in his classroom, on time every day! For him, there was definitely an absolute truth about the starting time, and if you were just a little late, you would pay for it! And this same teacher required us to read a text book. Not any book, but the true book that he truly assigned! And we had to take tests. Many of these were true and false tests! How can you take those kinds of tests if there is no absolutely true answer? Finally, the very existence of this teacher was the result of a set of absolute truths that can be found in his DNA chain! The color of his eyes, the color of his hair, his sex and an incredible number of other absolute truths were (and still are) based on absolute truths about his DNA sequencing! If you were to ask this chap if he had ever made a mistake in his entire life, I'll bet he would say, "of course!" but that presumes that there is a truthful measuring stick that can be compared to his behavior! If there is no truth, than no one can make a mistake!

This teacher would tell us that it was impossible to find and know the truth, but that was only because he really didn't WANT to dig all that hard. See, the truth is not always as easy as  $2+2=4$ . Sometimes it has to be uncovered and considered and discovered like  $E=mc^2$ . it takes time. It takes desire, but most of all, it takes an understanding that there is a truth and it can be found. If Einstein did not truly believe this, he would have stopped thinking about the theory of relativity long before he ever got started.



### The Importance of Asking the Right Questions

Sometimes the real problem is that we are asking the wrong question to begin with. That's why we're not able to realize and demonstrate the absolute truth. An old professor of mine told me about a dispute he was called to settle between a professor friend and a student. In an examination, the professor asked a simple question. "If I led you to a tall tower, and asked you to take a barometer to the top of the tower, how would you use the barometer to tell me how tall the tower is?" The teacher was looking for a specific answer that would utilize the barometer to measure atmospheric pressure at ground level and the top of the tower, and then develop the distance between these two points. But the student was a bit creative (and obstinate) and he gave a variety of

answers that did not utilize the barometer as he had hoped. In each solution, the student used the barometer creatively as a pendulum, and object to measure gravity, as a tool for comparing shadow ratios, and as a simple bribe for someone who actually knows the height of the building! All of these ways led to the truth of the building height, but none uncovered the truth that the professor was looking for. Why? Primarily because the professor was asking the right question in the wrong way! He wasn't SPECIFIC enough in his search for the truth from his student, and as a result, he got a number of answers to the question, without ever getting the answer he was looking for.

In a similar way, we are sometimes unspecific in our search for answers; sometimes we ask the wrong spiritual questions! If the question is simply how I can find happiness, or satisfaction, or purpose, well there are a number of ways I can do that (although most of them are very temporary). There may be many ways (many spiritual paths) that I can take in an effort to be happy or satisfied, but these goals are not specific enough. I'm asking some good questions (just like the professor) but they are not pointed enough. Happiness and satisfaction are secondary questions to a much more important question; what is the truth about the existence and nature of God? Personally, I am not interested in simple happiness and satisfaction. I am interested in the objective, absolute truth about God, because only this truth has long term significance.

A friend of mine recently purchased a new telescope in preparation for the recent location of Mars in the northern hemisphere. There was a particular Wednesday when Mars was closer to earth than it had been (or will be again) for another 550 years. On that one day opportunity, he set up his telescope but discovered that he could NOT see Mars much better than he could a month prior with his old telescope! Why? Because he was wrong about the date of the sighting and was incorrect by exactly one YEAR! Holding true to the wrong information with sincerity, he made a sincere effort to see the red planet, but was sincerely wrong about the timing. All truths are not equal. Only one true Wednesday could reveal Mars in its nearest proximity. In a similar manner, the nature of truth is such that only one true notion of God will reveal Him to you and I today.



### Could There Really Be Only One TRUE Way?

The reality is that the truth is not a matter of personal choice, and it's comforting to know that what you discover is true today, will still be true tomorrow. But, there's a reason why people want to deny there is an absolute truth...



#### John 3:19-21

*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.*

Jesus had to deal with people who did not believe there was an absolute truth. These kinds of people have existed from the beginning of time, although there are definitely more of us who embrace relativism today than in generations past! How do we answer those among us who are questioning the loving nature of God? How can he be loving yet so narrow minded as to limit us to only one way to know Him? Isn't that unloving and unfair?



But if you look at the history of our relationship with God, you will see that he has actually given us a huge number of opportunities! Just recall the history. We rejected His gracious offer in the Garden, his Covenant agreement through Abraham, his guidance through the laws of Moses, his messages as delivered by the prophets, and then finally his own son. In light of all the ways that we have rejected him, the question should not be, "Why is there just one way?" but instead, "Why is there ANY way?"

Many of you are still battling with the idea that there could only be one true God and one way to get to him. Why do you think that is so? Is it because it doesn't seem fair to us, in spite of the truth of our history with God? Or is it because we still want control? Let's pray about these things and ask God to help us understand his mercy and the fact that He is so patient with us, and ask God to help us learn to trust him for the truth.



### **Living Above the Lies**

Now let's go out and live our lives differently. Let's accept the reality that there IS a singular truth about the nature of God, so we can truly begin to search for it. Then, let's earnestly begin the search. If we are unwilling to even accept the premise that there IS an absolute truth, we will never begin the search that will eventually lead us to God. Let's live above the lies that truth does not exist or cannot be known. Let's begin the search for truth today.